



**Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee
on Education and Skills**

Uptake on Apprenticeships and Traineeships

**Opening Statement: Dr Jim Murray, Director of Academic Affairs
and Deputy CEO, THEA**

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Chair and Committee members

On behalf of the Technological Higher Education Association and its members, the fourteen institutes of technology, I would like to extend our thanks to you for the invitation to your meeting today to discuss the uptake of apprenticeships and traineeships.

Introduction – THEA members and apprenticeships

As indicated in THEA's submission of 2 November, the technological higher education sector is a strong supporter of apprenticeship, and it will remain a key element of its provision into the future. The first technological university, TU Dublin, will be the largest educational facilitator of apprenticeship programmes in the country when it is designated in January 2019. Twelve of THEA's fourteen members contribute to the provision of the off-the-job elements of some twenty-three of the designated craft apprenticeships (mainly phases 4 and 6). Of the nine new apprenticeships launched since 2016, seven are led by THEA members as coordinating providers, in areas as diverse as Polymer Processing Technology, Logistics, Chef de Partie, Laboratory Analysis (Biopharma), Industrial Electrical Engineering, Medtech Engineering and Insurance Practice. In addition, institutes of technology are the proposed coordinating providers for a further ten new apprenticeships currently under development.

The traditional apprenticeship and new programmes

Apprenticeship, in the Irish context, is a statutory national programme, that enables the apprentice to 'earn and learn' at the same time, and is traditionally associated with the construction, electrical, automotive and engineering industries. As you know, the great advantage of this approach is that it not only provides the opportunity to the apprentice to learn on the job, but also to participate fully as an employee in a real-world work environment. The new apprenticeships aim to extend this approach more broadly into sectors that have not traditionally been associated with apprenticeships. It is a fresh, ambitious and innovative undertaking, which THEA believes has the potential to bring about very significant enhancements to the apprenticeship system as a whole, and to those employment sectors that identify and choose it as the optimal model for educating and training their staff in particular occupations.

The role of apprenticeship programmes in education and training

THEA views statutory national apprenticeships as one key element in a broad family of education and training programmes that are based on a 'learn and work' model. This model also includes traineeships and non-apprenticeship programmes provided by the further and higher education sectors that have varying levels of non-paid, work-based learning embedded within them. These include work placements integrated into regular degree programmes, and bespoke programmes developed for individual companies. It is important

to offer this mixed portfolio of work-based learning to enhance the employability of all graduates, and equally important that employment sectors give consideration to which model is most suited to their recruitment needs.

Apprentice recruitment

Employers are primarily responsible for recruiting apprentices – not the education providers. Employers are best placed to comment on why there have been difficulties in recruiting apprentices. Our members are closer to the recruitment process of the new apprenticeships, and their experience to date suggests that recruitment tends to be more successful when an employment sector is well organised, and has a strong professional association behind it that can determine whether apprenticeship is an appropriate work-based learning model for that sector. A strong professional association also helps to mobilise individual companies in recruiting apprentices and can support that recruitment directly.

Challenge of increasing public awareness

There are significant challenges for all stakeholders in increasing the uptake of apprenticeships, and, specifically, in meeting the targets enunciated in the *Action plan to expand apprenticeship and traineeship in Ireland 2016-2020*. Arguably, the greatest challenge relates to enhancing awareness of apprenticeship amongst the populace at large. Although awareness of apprenticeship has increased in recent years at policy level, it is a far greater communications challenge to raise public awareness of apprenticeship as a valid and valued option for school leavers. The magnitude of the task is reflected in the stark fact that the total apprenticeship population at the end of the 2017-18 academic year was 14,871, while the total enrolments in public higher education were 235,644.

Regulatory and legislative challenges

It is arguable too that there is a need to simplify the regulatory environment in which the apprenticeship system operates. It remains subject to the Industrial Training Act, 1967, a piece of legislation that is fifty years old. While this legislation is sturdy and has stood the test of time, it is not easily reconciled with subsequent education and training legislation, particularly that relating to the national quality assurance system. It has led to a very complex, at times overly bureaucratic system within which to develop the new apprenticeship model. While all of the stakeholders have worked collaboratively to make the system work, it has undoubtedly hindered the agility and the responsiveness of the system, delaying the throughput of programmes and making it very difficult to predict and deliver registration targets.

Conclusion

As national supporters of the apprenticeship model, THEA's view is that the apprenticeship is an integral hub in the overall provision of education and training. Our members are significant providers and supporters of the model. We believe that with streamlined employer support, a focus on simplifying the interpretation of the regulations, a re-visit of the recruitment targets in collaboration with the consortia and other stakeholders, and a targeted public awareness campaign, the model can be enhanced to reach its full potential.